DANCE BAND OF BLIND ARTISTS.

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Taken from the TRIBUNE for October, 1937.

The following article is reprinted, with a few brief omissions, from the "Melody Master," July 24th, by kind permission of the author.

This week the Melody Master is happy to unfold one of the most romantic stories ever told about dance bands. It concerns the formation of a stage orchestra of eighteen blind artists got together, coached, directed and presented by Claude Bampton.

In his amazing project he is assisted by one sighted player only, the leader of the brass section. The venture is under the aegis of the National Institute for the Blind and is particularly inspired by Dr. Ernest Whitfield, the famous virtuoso of the violin, who is one of the treasurers of the Institute.

The story starts eighteen months ago, when Dr. Whitfield, who takes a deep interest in all matters musical pertaining to the N. I. B., conceived the idea that some of the younger blind musicians, naturally attuned to the modern spirit of jazz, might possibly be trained as dance musicians and so be launched into a career as professional exponents of that art.

In a roundabout way the Melody Master was invited to recommend a musician capable of giving the candidates the necessary training, and, after careful consideration, nominated Claude Bampton. The reason for this selection was governed by the extraordinary experiences which Bampton has enjoyed in his musical career. ...

Bampton's first job was to select from the candidates who came before him those he thought were young enough and adaptable enough for dance music. That he was rather exacting in his examination is proved by the fact that, initally, he only selected two players. This necessitated a search further afield for additional blind musicians, and shortly afterwards he had a band of six busily learning.

One of the first requests made to him by Dr. Whitfield was to give some kind of assurance that he could, within a reasonable time, produce these musicians as a band capable of undertaking private engagements. Claude promised that it would be done within nine months, and, in fact, within that period the band was accepting gigs.

Theoretically the material was fantastically good, thanks to the magnificant training given to blind musicians in the Royal College at Norwood. But these musicians have been given instructions entirely unfamiliar to them and the difficulty of teaching the intricacies of fingering on instruments such as saxophones and trumpets without being able to give visual examples must be immediately apparent. Everything, therefore, had to be done orally or through musical examples brailled from Claude's own orchestrations. . Nevertheless, the keenness of the players, the patience of the coach and the wonderful schooling of the pupils all resulted in rapid progress being made. So much so, indeed, that Dr. Whitfield, fired with enthusiasm, became ambitious for a much larger numer of his proteges enjoying the advantages of the scheme.

In short, he asked Bampton whether it would be possible to form a large stage band of blind players capable of touring the country and earning good money purely on thei merits and not on sympathetic appeal. This was as recently as March last, and Claude carefully pondered the matter and then gave an affirmative answer, subject to considerable support on the part of the N. I. B. being given in the way of equipping the band.

At this point it must be realized that the N. I. B. funds are contributed by the general public, and that consequently they have to be used with the utmost care and to the best possible effect. The N. I. B., however, have always believed that it is better to spend money in the training of the blind, whereby they may earn their livings in happiness and comfort, rather than dole it out in pittances, and the financial committee came to the conclusion that Claude Bampton's suggestion should be accepted in that in all probability it would result in a considerable number of their proteges being placed in a comfortable way in the employment market.

The finance committee also saw the force of Claude's arguments that if such a band were put on the stage it would have to be presented in such a good style as to compare more than favorably with the established sighted stage bands. Everybody at the Institute was agreed that there was to be no suggestion of a charitable appeal to the pleasure-seeking public and that, on the other hand, there should be every effort to mask the fact of the band's blindness. The necessary funds were therefore voted, and Bampton threw up all his other personal activities to make a whole-time job of the task in hand.

This was no inconsiderable sacrifice because Claude was well established in the west-end and earning a very steady and substantial income. ...

At the time many of the musicians were chosen for the band they could barely get about at all. They had to be encouraged and taught to move about decisively and without assistance, and it speaks much for their enthusiasm for the whole proposition that they responded miraculously. ...

Today there is little sign indeed that the musicians are incommoded very much by their sightlessness. They can get from their chairs to the microphones and pianos with nearly normal ease, and by the time they are ready for the stage they will also have been familiarised with the atmosphere of naked platforms, flood and arc lights, rostrums and the like.

One aspect of the stage show will be the use of many pianos, because in the combination the majority play the instrument brilliantly. Many of them have won degrees as piano players and organists. In all, seven pianos will be employed, as a variation from the conventional orchestral numbers which the band will play. There is, too, a considerable amount of versatility among the players in other directions. Some of them have the natural gift of entertainment, some play novelty instruments, and all of them are trained choristers, which will result in concerted rhythm singing of a high order. This aspect has been enriched by the inclusion in the show of three girl vocalists, all blind, of course, and here again the printed personnel shows that each has won degrees for both singing and piano playing. This makes a complement of eighteen blind members, who, together with Claude Bampton and his sighted trumpet player, make a full aggregate of twenty. ...

For touring purposes the company will travel its own staff of stage manager, dressers, electricians, and chaperons, and the staff wo k of traveling a very considerable equipment has been carefully worked out.

This equipment is of the completest possible kind, including new drape sets, special rostrums, special instrument-stands, and, of course, all the necessary orchestral instruments and the pianos. beyond this, however, there has had to be a lot of equipping in the matter of suits for male members and gowns for the girls. Apart from this, all the members have been given the finest possible dental treatment and hairdressing, while the girls are also undergoing special instruction in deportment.

Here, then, is a vast and ~~beneficient~~ beneficent undertaking carried out with wisdom and generosity. The stage is all set for the word "go."

The company, however, should prove even more telling on the concert platform, because, in the matter of standard orchestral music, this band has terrific scope, many of the players having a repertoire of thousands of standard works all committed to memory.

The Melody Master has heard the band in part of its stage show, which can be adapted for appearances of anything from thirty minutes to two hours, and pronounces it as first-class entertainment and stylish music.

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